



*Citation for published version:*

Deneulin, S & Townsend, N 2007, 'Public Goods, Global Public Goods and the Common Good', *International Journal of Social Economics*, vol. 34, no. 1-2, pp. 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290710723345>

*DOI:*

[10.1108/03068290710723345](https://doi.org/10.1108/03068290710723345)

*Publication date:*

2007

[Link to publication](#)

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# Public Goods, Global Public Goods and the Common Good

Séverine Deneulin and Nicholas Townsend<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Public economics has recently introduced the concept of global public goods as a new category of public goods whose provision is central for promoting the well-being of individuals in today's globalized world. This paper examines the extent to which introducing this new concept in international development is helpful for understanding human well-being enhancement. It argues that the concept of global public goods could be more effective if the conception of well-being it assumes is broadened beyond the individual level. 'Living well' or the 'good life' does not dwell in individual lives only, but also in the lives of communities which human beings form. A successful provision of global public goods depends on this recognition that the 'good life' of the communities that people form is a constitutive component of the 'good life' of individual human beings. The paper considers some implications of the concept of the common good for international development, and suggests that the rediscovery of this concept, and identification of how to nurture the common good, constitute one of the major tasks for development theory and policy.

## 1. Introduction

Globalization is a term that now permeates everyday language. Old concepts are being revised in the light of the reality of the world as a global village. The concept of public goods has not escaped this global remake. In their seminal book, *Global Public Goods: International Cooperation in the 21st Century*, Kaul *et al.* (1999) have underlined that people's well-being does not depend only on the provision of public goods by national governments, but increasingly depends on the provision of global public goods that only international cooperation can secure. They argue that the concept of global public goods helps us respond to the new global challenges of the twenty-first century. The book discusses a wide range of global public goods which national governments alone cannot secure, such as financial stability, peace, the environment and cultural heritage. For example, the well-being of Bangladeshi people might be affected by severe flooding caused by climate change which their national government can do nothing to prevent. Only international cooperation among governments at the global level can provide the global public good of climate stability. Recognizing the existence of global public goods, and securing their provision, is central for promoting the well-being of individuals in today's globalized world.

This paper examines the extent to which introducing the concept of global public goods in international development indeed helps us to better respond to the new challenges of this century. It

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argues that the concept of global public goods could be more effective if the conception of well-being it assumes is broadened beyond the individual level. 'Living well' or the 'good life' does not dwell in individual lives only, but also in the lives of communities which human beings form. A successful provision of global public goods depends on this recognition that the 'good life' of the communities that people form is a constitutive component of the 'good life' of individual human beings.

The second section examines the concept of public goods and discusses some problems generally associated with their provision. It underlines that in the literature public goods are considered as instrumental to individual well-being and to be provided to this end. However, there exist public goods which defy the assumption that collective action, and the ensuing public goods provision, is always instrumental to individual well-being. The third section contrasts collective goods and 'common goods' and goes on to show that human action is sometimes undertaken for the sake of the good life understood as intrinsically in common. This has been referred to by the term 'the common good' in the history of Western political thought. As the political community has traditionally been the highest form of community, the fourth section analyzes the concept of the political common good and clarifies some conceptual ambiguities related to it. The final section considers implications of the concept of the common good for international development. The paper concludes by suggesting that rediscovery of this concept, and identification of how to nurture the common good, constitute one of the major tasks for development theory and policy.

## **2. Public goods and global public goods**

Public goods have long been a central concept of public economics.<sup>2</sup> They are characterized by non-excludability and non-rivalry in their consumption. A good is non-excludable if a person's consumption of it cannot practically be excluded. The good can simply not be provided while keeping some customers out. It is non-rival if a person's consumption does not reduce the benefits of someone else's consumption of the good. A typical example of a public good is street lighting. It is there for all to benefit from, irrespectively of the consumers' contribution to its provision. The good is non-excludable as nobody passing on the street can be excluded from the lighting, and it is (more or less)

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<sup>2</sup> The concept was introduced in economic theory by Samuelson in 1954. See Hudson and Jones (2005) for a discussion of Samuelson's concept of public goods, and the way voters perceive the degree of 'publicness' of public goods.

non-rival as each individual on the street benefits from it without the benefit for one detracting from that for others. The literature discusses the ‘purity’ of public goods and shows there are relatively few wholly pure examples. Street lighting is not pure to the extent that there can be rivalry in consumption, i.e. crowding out of some people from the benefits. There are less pure public goods, such as free health emergency services. A certain number of people using an emergency service does not detract from others’ access to the service, but, more obviously than with street lighting, there is a saturation point where too many people using it prevents others from doing so.

Given the non-excludable and non-rival nature of public goods, they cannot be provided satisfactorily through a market mechanism but have to be provided through some form of public action (e.g. via taxation). Public provision does not necessarily entail government provision. Public goods can be provided by other actors than governments. For example, even if a beach cleaning service is ensured by a private water company through water user fees, a clean (and publicly accessible) beach remains a ‘public good’ (although an impure one). It is non-rival in the sense that some people using the beach do not prevent others from using it, and it is not excludable in the sense that nobody can be excluded from using the beach, whether users have contributed to the cleaning costs or not.

Our aim is not to undertake an extensive review of the literature on public goods.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of our argument, we would like to underline two points: that the provision of public goods is central to securing human well-being, and that, given their characteristics, public goods are open to free-riding and vulnerable to what is known as the ‘failure of collective action’.

If we take Amartya Sen’s definition of human well-being in terms of the freedoms that people have reason to choose and value (Sen, 1999), or if we take Martha Nussbaum’s list of central human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000), it is obvious that human well-being would not be secured without the existence of public goods. For example, the ‘freedom to be healthy’ depends on the existence of basic infrastructure such as hygiene campaigns, access to basic sanitation facilities and drinkable piped water. Hygiene campaigns are a public good in the sense that posters or widespread advertising about e.g. the spread of HIV/AIDS are available to all. My seeing the advert and receiving the information does not reduce another person’s possibility of seeing the advert (non-rival), and nobody can be

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the literature on public goods, see Cornes and Sandler (1996), Cowen (1992), Sandler (2001).

excluded from seeing the posters on the street (non-excludable). The provision of a sewage system is another example of a good whose public health benefits for a city cannot exclude anybody living there (even if some lack finance needed to access it individually), and whose use by one individual does not reduce the benefits of someone else's use of it (assuming it is adequate for the population it serves). We could go on listing all the public goods whose provision is central for human well-being.

The second aspect of public goods which we would like to underline is the absence of correlation between a person's contribution to its provision and her use of it. Consider such public goods as street lighting, road maintenance and clean beaches. Holiday makers enjoy the use of these goods while not contributing to their provision through council taxes. Given this absence of correlation between pay and use, it has been a well-known problem that public goods are open to free-riding, that is, one can use the good while not making any contribution. Some residents in the south-west of England resent paying the highest prices for water supply in the UK on the ground that their payments cover the cost of cleaning beaches used mainly by tourists, who are in this respect free-riders.

Another consequence of the characteristics of public goods is that often they are better supplied through public provision, which individuals can influence through public action.<sup>4</sup> If governments fail to provide the public good of accessible courts or a well functioning police force, individuals acting alone do not have power to secure their provision. What is needed is 'collective action', that is, action which 'arises when the efforts of two or more individuals are needed to accomplish an outcome' (Sandler, 1992:1).

Yet Olson's pioneering study of *The Logic of Collective Action* underlined the tragedy of the absence of such action that arises from individuals balancing the costs of participating in it against the uncertainty of its benefits. For example, the fact that millions of people protested against the Iraq War in 2003 did not change the outcome. Given the uncertain benefits of collective action, rational individuals might prefer staying comfortably at home rather than enduring the costs of travelling to London to protest and spend a whole day in the cold and rain. This argument is also often used to explain the lack of political involvement of people living at the edge of existence. Given the uncertain

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<sup>4</sup> Drèze and Sen (2002) define public action as 'policy and governance, on the one side, and cooperation, disagreement and public protest on the other' (p. v).

benefits of political protests or campaigns, it is more rational for people to keep on working long hours for subsistence pay than to bear the costs of collective action, such as union organizations, which might not bear fruit. Another problem with collective action is that all benefit from its successful outcome, even if some have not participated in it.

The concept of public goods has recently acquired a global dimension. Kaul *et al.* (1999:16) define global public goods as those which 'tend towards universality in the sense that they benefit all countries, population groups and generations'. They have the following characteristics 'at minimum': 1) their 'benefits extend to more than one group of countries'; and 2) they 'do not discriminate against any population group or any set of generations, present or future'. Anand (2004: 216) extends this by proposing three criteria by which a good qualifies as a 'global public good': it should '(i) cover more than one group of countries; (ii) benefit not only a broad spectrum of countries but also a broad spectrum of the global population; (iii) meet the needs of the present generations without jeopardising those of the future generations.'

Like other public goods, global public goods vary in 'purity', a pure global public good being one whose non-excludability and non-rivalry characteristics have a truly universal dimension. Some aspects of the natural environment fall into this category of pure global public goods, such as sunlight and a climate in which human habitation is possible. The benefits of such goods are accessible unevenly in different locations, but despite this they benefit the earth as a whole and, therefore, all countries, without (at least in the short and medium term) 'consumption' by some preventing or reducing consumption by others, and without consumption by any country being excludable. Impure global public goods are marked by a lesser universality. Kaul *et al.* (1999: 453) arranged global public goods according to the following typology): 1) Natural global commons (such as the ozone layer and climate stability); 2) Human-made global commons (such as scientific and practical knowledge, principles and norms, and cultural heritage); and 3) Global policy outcomes (such as peace, health and financial stability).

Thus global public goods are goods whose characteristics are such that their provision cannot be left to market mechanisms (unlike private goods) or national government action (unlike domestic public goods). In the absence of an international body endowed with the power of levying taxes to

finance global public goods or endowed with the power of making enforceable laws to provide them, voluntary co-operation and global collective action are currently two ways of ensuring supply of global public goods (Anand, 2004:223). Voluntary donations of governments towards overseas development aid are one way of financing the global public good of increased knowledge of how to prevent malaria or HIV/AIDS. Global social movements, such as the green movement, are another form of action aimed at securing the global public good of a non-polluted environment. The creation of a 'Global Fund', distinct from overseas development aid, is another way which has been proposed to provide global public goods.<sup>5</sup>

Some authors have questioned whether the definition of public goods given in neo-classical economics (as outlined above) is adequate. They have argued that the extent to which a good is perceived as 'public' does not depend as much on its inherent characteristics as on prevailing social values within a given society about what *should* be provided by non-market mechanisms. There are goods which possess a non-excludable and non-rival character but which societies do not value as 'public', i.e., they do not value the good as something to be provided by public provision. Following Wuyts (1992), Gasper (2002) gives the examples of sanitation in nineteenth century Europe and twentieth century South Africa under apartheid. While in Europe, sanitation became a 'public' issue which concerned both rich and poor – sewage systems were valued as necessary in order to prevent the spread of diseases from marginal to privileged areas, South Africa did not value sanitation as a 'public' good. Instead of public provision of sanitation facilities in marginal areas, it valued transport from remote black townships to privileged white areas as a 'public' good worthy of state provision. Wuyts (1992) concludes that public goods are socially defined and constructed according to what is perceived as a 'public need', rather than containing certain inherent characteristics of non-excludability and non-rivalry. Given this, we might call these 'public priority goods'.

In this way, Gasper and Wuyts point out a misleading aspect of the standard economic definition of public goods given earlier. A good which is non-excludable and non-rival might still be perceived as non-'public' and hence not worthy of public provision.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on different modalities for financing global public goods, see Anand (2004) and Sandler (2002).

In addition to this, there is another important shortcoming of the economic concept of public goods, namely that these are seen only as instrumental to each individual's well-being. We argue that the mainstream international development theory faces a major challenge not only to incorporate the concept of global public goods into its ethical underpinnings but also to conceive of human well-being beyond the frame of reference given by individualistic socio-economic theory.

The recent literature on global public goods assumes that they are instrumentally essential to a flourishing human life, and that therefore there is a strong case for putting mechanisms in place to provide them. Indeed, climate stability is essential to the well-being of billions of people, if not everyone, on the planet. Without it, innumerable human lives are at risk of flood, drought and or increasingly frequent extreme weather conditions. Scientific knowledge is another example of a global public good crucial to individual human well-being. The discovery of penicillin and antibiotics enabled millions of lives to be saved. Given this assumption, current debates focus on the design of the institutions necessary for their provision. Kaul *et al.* (1999:450) conclude their study with the following policy recommendations: i) creation of international laws which address the global nature of public goods; ii) promotion of participation of civil society at the global level; iii) giving people and governments the necessary incentives to take action for the provision of global public goods.

While research is being done about various ways of providing global public goods, there is little research examining questions regarding the justification for their provision. Their instrumental value for individual well-being seems a sufficient justification. However, whether looking historically or trans-culturally, one can find examples of public goods which defy valuation as only instrumentally beneficial for individuals. Consider the place of cathedrals in their medieval civic settings and equivalent buildings in non-Christian societies. As well as expressing belief in a realm that transcends immediate time and place, they are one example of such human-made or natural features of a city that give it beauty and, over time, contribute to defining its identity. Cathedrals are public goods to the extent that, first, no-one can be excluded from the complex combination of benefits that they give, including such identity formation and architectural beauty, and, second, the appreciation of them by some does not reduce the possibility of others receiving the same benefits. Such civic events as carnivals give a partly similar range of benefits. Such benefits accrue to people as participants in a city's life, not to individuals conceived of as distinct from this. Moreover, often medieval cathedrals

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did not have an immediate instrumental effect on their builders' well-being, as these did their work for negligible monetary reward and at great health costs. Why did people put such collective effort into buildings that they would not even enjoy in their lifetime? Writing about cathedrals as among the remaining puzzles of collective action, Sandler (2001:74) asks the question, 'What makes generations work collectively in an effective manner for some goals and not for others?' He concludes that the existence of collective action depends on answering that question.

Surprisingly, the literature on global public goods has dealt very little, if at all, with the goals underpinning collective action and the provision of global public goods. The next section argues that, when human actions are undertaken for promoting people's well-being, it is not only the 'good life' of discrete individuals which matters but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common, which has been referred to as the 'common good'. While the concept of the common good has been central in the history of Western political philosophy, it is in recent literature subject to some conceptual confusion. Before discussing the relevance of the concept of the common good for international development, we first need to seek conceptual clarity. This is what the next two sections aim to do.

### 3. Common goods

There are several definitions of the common good. In a recent articulation of its classical conception, Dupré (1994:173) defines it as 'a good proper to, and attainable only by the community, yet individually shared by its members.' For Jacques Maritain, a major Thomist philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the common good is constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in common and that they *communicate* to each other, such as values, civic virtues and a sense of justice (Maritain, 1946). Cahill (2004:9) defines the common good as 'a solidaristic association of persons that is more than the good of individuals in the aggregate'. In the major recent study on the topic, David Hollenbach (2002: 81) describes the common good as the good of being a community, as 'the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.' While these various definitions need such clarification as we hope to give, let us say in light of them that the common good is not the outcome of a collective action which makes everybody better off than if they acted

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individually, but is the good of that shared enterprise itself. It is the good of the community which comes into being in and through that enterprise.

As these definitions already suggest, those who use this concept speak both of ‘common goods’, plural, and of ‘the common good’, singular, the latter being in some sense overarching, macro as opposed to micro. No doubt the language of ‘common good’ can be used imprecisely, vaguely and rhetorically. This section aims to show how it may be used with some analytical precision and thereby to spell out the meaning it tends implicitly to have even when used without clear elucidation. We proceed by distinguishing conceptually between collective action/goods and common action/goods.

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People produce very many goods by acting together rather than alone because it is instrumentally necessary or (even if not necessary) convenient or efficient to do so. Examples include buildings, roads, meals for workforces, waste disposal. Each of us could build a house, of sorts, alone but we could not do so very conveniently. So we use collective action. However once such goods have been produced, we can (at least in principle) each benefit from them alone – live in the house, travel on the road. There is nothing about goods that are produced through collective action because this is instrumentally necessary, convenient or efficient which means their benefits cannot accrue to individuals alone. Certainly people often benefit together from such goods: they live in a house together, they eat in the workplace canteen. But sharing such goods is incidental to what makes them good if, for example, those sharing a house are neither family nor friends but do so only for reasons of economy. In this case both the production of and the benefiting from such a good is collective, but it is the latter accidentally. While the sharing is instrumentally beneficial for each recipient, there is nothing intrinsic to the good itself which requires it to be shared. Such goods are, rather, commodities whose supply requires collective action – this undertaken for instrumental reasons but not on account of the inherent nature of the goods – and whose consumption might or might not be shared. . Let us for simplicity call all such goods ‘collective goods’. Most if not all public goods identified as such in economics literature fall into this category.

There is another, rather different, kind of shared good, comprising those which intrinsically are common goods.<sup>6</sup> Compare with the examples above an orchestral or choral musical performance, a celebratory dinner, or a team sport. Taking the first of these, unless the various musicians each play or sing their particular parts, together performing for the audience, the good simply could not exist at all. Its 'production' is inseparable from, indeed is exactly the same thing as, the good itself: the good lies in the action together which generates it. Moreover, benefiting from the good is by participating in that action, whether in the orchestra or audience. This is to say that the shared action is intrinsic, as well as instrumental, to the good itself and also that its benefits come in the course of that shared action. Goods of this kind are therefore inherently common in their 'production' and in their benefits.

Suppose a well has been dug in a village which means that women of the village no longer have to walk long distances for water. Despite the convenience of the well in the village, sometimes the women might decide still to walk together outside the village to get water, because this is a good opportunity to be together as a group, an experience the benefits of which are inseparable from its being shared. That is, their walking together is inherently a common good – they have no need to do it for any other end than being together and its 'goodness' for them comes from the action itself being common. Their walk is analogous to the concert or team game.

A characteristic of common goods is that they cannot be chosen by individuals alone. They can neither be constructed by individuals separately, nor are they a collectively generated 'resource bank' available to individuals to choose, or not choose, from. Yet neither do they exist only because of some kind of forced co-operation. Common goods exist because of a tradition of shared action which makes them possible, and in which people participate freely, thereby sustaining and developing it. Of course particular people may freely choose to begin to participate or to cease to do so. But, rather than being attainable simply by individual choice of a pre-existing resource, such goods exist only in the common action that generates them.

Collective goods and common goods are similar, then, in that to exist they both require shared action. But for collective goods this is accidental to the nature of the good itself, whereas for common goods it is intrinsic. Collective action that extends the range of commodities from among which

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'common goods' is a synonym for what Charles Taylor (1995) calls 'irreducibly social goods'. We prefer to use the term 'common good' instead in order to better render account of the linkages between *a* common good at the micro level and *the* common good at the macro level. This discussion owes much to Taylor's work.

individuals can choose to benefit cannot make available common goods to anyone. These require something qualitatively different, co-ordination of action with others because the good for each is found in this itself.

To the extent that human wellbeing is constituted by benefiting from common goods, public policy may undermine rather than contribute to human wellbeing if it fails to recognise common goods and so is formed and implemented without such recognition. Its effects could make certain very valuable common goods unsustainable or even directly destroy them. Relatively little attention has been given to common goods in development economics, largely because its ethical foundations have been articulated in terms of the preferences or free choices of individuals, as we will discuss in the fifth section.

Moving beyond such ‘micro’ common goods, we may speak of ‘the common good’ when what is in view is not just a one-off common good (such as in the examples given, a concert, a team game, a shared walk) but is one that endures through time and, in particular, is a good for a group of people whose lives interact in multiple ways, usually because they share the same physical living space. This could be a monastery, a village or town, the ancient *polis* or the modern city. The common good of a town is analogous to a concert, but one that continues indefinitely. As the residents participate in the life of the town, they generate a good that could not exist otherwise and which is partly constitutive of the wellbeing of each of them. Consider the city of London: to the extent that in our work and travel and play we participate in the irreducibly common actions of, say, crowds, queues, rush-hour, Sunday afternoon on the London South Bank, and so on (*ad infinitum*), so we help to engender an extraordinarily complex and obviously irreducibly common good – one entirely unavailable to any of the individuals concerned acting separately. The good of any communal or cultural entity cannot be reduced to goods which could in principle be enjoyed by each of its constituent members alone. Such a common good is definitive of ‘community’, as opposed to of a collectivity. The latter’s purpose is instrumental to production of goods such as public goods, whereas the former’s end is the common good its shared life itself generates. We speak of *the* common good because it is not just a discrete and passing common good, but is that of people together precisely as they form a community.

In concluding this section, it may be worth emphasising two clarifying points. First, there are of course both common goods and common ‘bads’. Analytically, what makes a good common is not what makes it good. Many would see rush-hour as a ‘bad’, even if at the same time it has some part in what people appreciate in a city’s life overall. Racism always corrupts a common good; the Apartheid laws structured a common bad. At a ‘micro’ level, it is obvious that what can be the great common goods of friendship, marriage and family prove often to be ‘bads’ (although a reason for this could sometimes be that participants assume they are commodities and so misunderstand how they can be common goods). Our aim is not to romanticise common goods. The second point is related: to refer to the common good of a town, city, etc., does not imply for a moment that what this good actually consists in will be agreed by all; on the contrary, this may be and usually is highly contested. Yet recognising this does not nullify the claim that we may speak of ‘the common good’ in this way. Indeed in the Aristotelian conception which more than any other has contributed to forming Western thought on this issue, deliberation together about what constitutes the good of the *polis* formed an inherent part of its common good. This leads us to a further conceptual clarification regarding the concept of the common good, namely that the common good is a specifically *political* concept which has implications for the role of political action.

#### **4. The political common good**

Let us first notice that, just as speaking of the common good of a community does not imply that there will be agreement within it about the ‘content’ of that common good, so also speaking of the common goods of various neighbouring or overlapping communities does not imply that these will be easily in harmony. On the contrary, dominant understandings of their respective common goods within such communities, and corresponding practices, may well be in sharp conflict. Consider a village in rural El Salvador from which many adult males have migrated to the United States for work and send earnings from this back as remittances. Suppose, further, that such migrants pool a large proportion of the remittances in a common fund in order to finance services such as schools, roads, public parks and health centres. They do this given the state’s apparent inability to provide such services, motivated by concern for the ‘common good’ of their community, as a ‘solidaristic association of persons’.

However, the common good of the local community understood in this way might clash with the common good of another community. While migration might be good for improving the common life of the village, it might harm the common life of families who have to cope with the male members of the family abroad. While the solidaristic association of the local community is in this way reinforced through migration, the solidaristic association of the family might be under strain. It might also have negative consequences for the solidaristic association of the country as a whole. Migration may have perverse effects on redistributive policies, reducing the level of solidarity among inhabitants of the same country – the central state does not have incentives to finance public services for the poor or to implement redistributive policies since the poor finance these services themselves by migrating to Western countries.<sup>7</sup> This example immediately draws attention to three levels of community – family, local and national – and makes clear that recognition that we may speak of the common good in relation to all these (and other) levels is not naïve about conflict. The pervasiveness of such tensions and conflicts in practice points to the potential benefits that a more central political authority may bring in seeking to resolve such tensions and conflicts justly.

This brings us to what we could call the ‘special’ sense that ‘the common good’ has conventionally had in western political thought. It has been used especially of the one sovereign or ‘perfect’ political community, in relation to which ‘lower-level’ communities are seen as parts of a whole. Such an understanding stems from Aristotle and was given more developed expression by Aquinas. The latter used the term ‘public good’ to refer to the common good of the *specifically political community* in the sense of that which has sovereignty and therefore authority over ‘lesser’ communities within it. He was taking inspiration from Aristotle for whom the highest good is that of the *polis*.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle understood this distinctly political community as one endowed with the power to deliberate about what is just and unjust, and the power to make laws on the basis of that deliberation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the linkages between migration and the common good, see Deneulin (2006a).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for everyone always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. But, if all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest good of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good.’ [*Politics* 1252<sup>a</sup>1-6]

<sup>9</sup> ‘Hence, it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. [...] Now, that man is *more* of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. [...] The power of speech is intended to set forth [...] the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.’ [*Politics* 1253<sup>a</sup>1-17] ‘Justice is the bond of men in states; for the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in political society.’ [*Politics* 1253<sup>a</sup>37-40]

Aquinas followed Aristotle's definition of a political community. This public good may be distinguished in Aquinas's usage from the private goods of individuals and the private common goods of families and households (Finnis, 1998b:179). The common good of the political community, that is, the 'public good', is related to individual goods but is not their sum.<sup>10</sup> Rather the relationship is that of the whole and its parts (*ratio totius et partes*): 'The common good is the end [purpose/goal] of individual persons who live in community, in the same way as the good of the whole is the end of all its parts'.<sup>11</sup>

The influence of Aquinas's use of the term 'public good' to refer specifically to the common good of the political community has given rise to some confusion in contemporary ethics: the economic and political definitions are often mixed together, with the 'common good' sometimes used to refer to the modern economic understanding of 'public good'. For example, Raymond Geuss (2001: 37) writes that, 'The common good is [...] an increase in the number of temples and bridges usable by all'; or 'The most primitive notion of the common good is of some external state of affairs that members of a group would do well to bring about, such as building a dam or bridge.' (Geuss, 2001: 46). What members of a group do well together is obviously to be distinguished from what they bring about (the commodity of a public good in the economic sense). The latter is external to, and independent of, the relationships which exist among the members of a society. In contrast, the common good inheres in the relationships themselves (Hollenbach, 2002: 8). It lies in their being and doing together, not in a separate outcome that this produces.

It is worth noting that some writers have questioned whether the 'public good' in Aquinas's sense has intrinsic or only instrumental value. In interpreting Aquinas, Finnis argues that the common good specific to the political community is instrumental to individual flourishing, even if it is inherently inter-personal (for example, distributive justice and peace): 'The specifically political common good is instrumental to make people good citizens. It is to assist individuals and families do well what they should be doing' (1998b:187).

Other interpretations of Aquinas point in another direction. Pakaluk (2001) argues that Finnis's interpretation of the political common good as instrumental to individual flourishing is

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<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica* Qu. 58 art 7. ad secundum. For Aquinas on the common good, see especially Finnis (1998a).

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae qu. 58 art 9 ad. 3.

internally inconsistent. On the one hand, Finnis holds that the private common good of marriage is *inherently* good. The union of two partners is not only instrumental to each other's well-being. On the other hand, he holds the view that the specifically political common good is instrumental to the well-being of each of the members of the political community. According to Pakaluk, Finnis has not given sufficient reasons for this way of distinguishing between the two: 'If we say that one's relationship to one's spouse is somehow constitutive of a person's happiness [or well-being], and thus not a mere means to it, why not the same of one's relationship to fellow citizens generally?' (2001:64).

While adjudication between rival interpretations of Aquinas is not the primary purpose here, Finnis's reading sits very oddly against the background of the Aristotelian 'civic humanist' tradition, of which the defining feature is the claim that human wellbeing is found in participation in the life of the *polis* and which finds expression deeply in Aquinas, in the context of a Christian theological worldview. Civic humanism's claim is that the common action generated by such participation is where the good life is experienced or enjoyed; the 'public good' so understood is not only instrumental to some other set of 'private' goods. The shared life of the political community is a good in itself. It is what 'enable[s] people both to participate actively in building up the common good and to share in the benefits of the common good' (Hollenbach, 2002:201). Low political participation confines people to pursuing the good they can in their private lives, limiting their freedom to determine the conditions of the life they share together (Hollenbach, 2002:100).

Conceiving the common good as the good of the specifically political community raises the immediate question of what in practice the 'specifically political' community is. Is such political community defined by the borders of a nation-state? Addressing this very important question would be the subject of another paper. What we would like to highlight here is that, just as there is potential conflict among communities at different levels about what constitutes their common goods, there is also potential conflict among what members of different 'sovereign' political communities understand to be their common goods. Some authors, such as Lisa Cahill, are increasingly aware of the limitations of conceiving the common good within the limits of the political community defined by the boundaries of the nation-state. Cahill argues that the concept of the common good as Aquinas, and the Catholic social tradition, articulates it is outdated. She proposes the concept of the 'global common good' which she defines as 'participation of all peoples in a diverse and differentiated, yet solidaristic



and collaborative, world society' (2005:54). Research on the concept of the global common good is at a very incipient stage, and is an avenue of inquiry which is beyond the scope of this paper.

We have given attention to Aquinas's understanding because of his use of 'public good' for the common good of the specifically political community. This has created, as underlined earlier, some confusion with the economic concept of public goods. Let us clarify the conceptual differences between public goods in the economic sense on the one hand and common goods, both micro and macro, on the other. We note four points.

First, in one important respect, public goods and common goods appear similar, namely that in the same sense in which public goods are non-rival, common goods are also. Consider the examples of the common goods of orchestral performance and team game. So long as all of the participants in the common action that generates the common good sustain their participation in this, all participants benefit from the good in question. It is not possible for some to consume some part of them so that less is left for others. This is because 'consumption' is inseparable from 'production'. Indeed, common goods appear to be more than non-rival, in the sense that their supply can increase when people 'consume' them, as goods such as friendship and mutual love or trust show.

A second point can be made about the non-rivalry criterion, this time drawing attention to a contrast. Whereas the purity of public goods is limited by the potential for saturation, that of common goods is threatened by a kind of opposite, non-participation. Their pure status is diminished to the extent that there is withdrawal from or distortion of participation in the common action that generates them. Adultery distorts marriage because, at least in the traditional Christian and western understanding, the common good of marriage is constituted in part by mutual practice of fidelity. Divorce that might follow adultery means intentional withdrawal by at least one spouse from the participation that generates the common good. This 'micro' example indicates that common goods are vulnerable to non-participation in a somewhat parallel way as public goods are vulnerable to saturation.

Third, in respect of the quality of non-excludability, there are senses in which common goods both share and do not share this with public goods. The latter is the more obvious: common goods, whether micro or macro, are almost always defined by reference to a specific group of people – a

couple, family, town, nation-state, etc. – and they describe a good primarily for this group. Other people, therefore, are not only excludable but are, in a sense, excluded. To put this differently, given that common goods are generated by participation, non-participants cannot benefit from them in what might be called an ‘internal’ or ‘immediate’ way. However, the benefits of such common goods can ‘spill over’ to others and they often do so, for example through hospitality: some learn what good family life is like not through their own but through being welcome in another. While common goods are in that obvious way not non-excludable, for ‘internal’ participants themselves they do share this quality of public goods. When someone is able to participate – to play in the orchestra, to take part in civic life – she benefits from the good (she cannot be excluded) because the good is received in participation itself.

Evidently these contrasting features of common goods with respect to non-excludability mean that definition of the boundaries of the ‘community’ in which the common good inheres is important. While exploring the issues here is beyond the scope of this paper, we note two points. One is that at least some common goods depend on specifying who may participate, for example members of the orchestra or two teams of 11 players. The second point is potentially more important for international development: in the case of macro common goods, if the good is to exist at all, then enabling those who theoretically are members of the relevant community to participate in practice is a prerequisite. While the concept of ‘social exclusion’ that is prominent in social policy discourse can be read simply in terms of exclusion from consumption, it can also be interpreted in terms of exclusion from the possibility of benefiting from the common good. This suggests the potential importance of a concept of necessary conditions for the possibility of participation in the common good.

Fourth, the typology of global public goods presented by Kaul *et al.* and outlined above includes in its category of ‘human-made global commons’ goods such as ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘norms and principles’. ‘Cultural life’ undoubtedly denotes a common good – it exists only as people participate in it. The degree of solidarity which inheres in a given society, or what Kaul *et al.* call ‘equity’, is another instance of a true common good. We suggest that ‘global public goods’ such as scientific knowledge (which is a product of collective action) need to be carefully distinguished from ‘common goods’ which inhere truly in action in common, rather than being its product. When participation in the common good of solidarity ceases, the common good ceases to exist. When

collective action to produce scientific knowledge ceases, knowledge produced remains available. Even if, as just indicated, there are ways in which common goods have a non-excludable and non-rival character like neo-classical public goods, these two features are presented in terms of participation and generation of the goods themselves and not in terms of consumption of a commodity. This suggests that the typology presented by Kaul *et al.* is misleading in seeing some common goods as public goods.

## **5. Concluding remarks: well-being and the common good**

One reason for the value of drawing attention to the concept of the common good in current development ethics is simply that widespread assumptions about human well-being among theorists and policy-makers mean that it is overlooked. A consequence of this is that the question of whether giving it attention in policy-making might lead to real benefits for people is not addressed. We suggest, in concluding, that the concept of the common good is of non-negligible significance for international development.

Development ethics has tended in its underlying assumptions about human well-being to espouse, whether deliberately or by default, what can be called (following Charles Taylor) 'atomism'.<sup>12</sup> According to atomism, society is conceived as a large number of distinct individuals, or atoms, each pursuing their own conception of the good life. They may see this in hedonist terms, as a matter of maximising pleasure, or in libertarian terms, as a matter of maximising individual free choice, or in 'expressivist' terms, as a matter of each individual giving full expression to what is unique within him or her. Such atomistic conceptions of human well-being combine well with recognition of contemporary value pluralism: there is no longer a shared common conception of the 'good human life', let alone the 'good polity', so people just have to determine for themselves how they will live and what it means for themselves to live a 'good life'. John Rawls's theory of justice has been the most influential articulation of a political philosophy that appears to fit with atomism: endowed with a set of primary goods, individuals are free to pursue the good life as they each conceive it, provided they respect the two principles of justice.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Note that this does not imply that Rawls's theory is dependent on or entails atomism.

Amartya Sen's capability approach can be ranged alongside 'atomistic' theories of the good in the sense that the end of development and political action is to expand the freedoms that individuals have reason to choose and value. Development is a matter of giving more opportunities for each individual to live a life of his or her choice. This does not mean that other people's lives do not enter into an individual's conception of the good life; indeed other regarding concerns such as sympathy and commitment can be central elements within what a person has reason to choose and value. This does not mean either that common goods such family relationships do not enter as components of individual well-being (Sen, 2002). What this means is that no teleological account of the good that societies ought to promote beyond (individual) freedom is offered. While Sen's capability approach has focused on the well-being of individuals as the end of development, the common good tradition outlined in the previous two sections leads to a conception of human freedom as oriented towards a *telos* which includes both the good of individuals and the good of the communities in which individuals live.

One could argue that Nussbaum's capability approach is an attempt to anchor the 'freedoms that people have reason to choose and value' within the *telos* of the good human life (Nussbaum, 2000). However, her version of the capability approach, with her list of central human capabilities, continues to situate the *telos* of all human actions in the freedom of each individual to live a life of her choice. One could also argue that there are traces of the common good tradition within Sen's capability approach itself. Drèze and Sen (2002) emphasise the crucial importance of political participation as an intrinsic component of human well-being. Public debate is indeed central for articulating a society's values and fleshing out the capabilities that people have reason to choose and value (Sen, 2004a). Despite these traces, the capability approach remains centred on the freedoms of individuals when it comes to assessing development and does not explicitly acknowledge the goodness of life in common in its ethical evaluation of states of affairs.<sup>14</sup>

Introducing the concept of global public goods leaves the current foundations of development ethics unchanged. Global public goods are commodities which contribute to giving better

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<sup>14</sup> See Deneulin (2006b, chapters 2 and 3) for the absence of a *telos* in both Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach beyond individual freedom.

opportunities for each individual to live a life she chooses to live. The global public good of climate stability enables individuals more fully to live lives of their choice with less risk of damage from extreme weather. The global public good of scientific knowledge such as of the vaccine against tuberculosis, enables millions of people not to have their life shortened or damaged by the disease and so increases their choices. The global public good of peace gives opportunities to people to live a life they have reason to choose and value without it being hampered by conflict and its consequences. Such global public goods can be understood, then, as serving to improve the lives of individuals by expanding their opportunities to live a life of their choice.

The concept of the common good takes us beyond seeing the well-being of discrete individuals as the only proper goal or *telos* of human action. It enables recognition that there are goods, including many that are non-trivial for human well-being, the benefits of which may be received by people only in a common enterprise. Of course, the people who benefit from such goods can be conceived of discretely. The point is that it is only in relationships, structured as necessary to enable the common action that ‘produces’ common goods, that lives which benefit from such goods can be lived. In this way, the good for each person can be conceived of only by reference to the good of the others with whom her good is possible. Analysis which focuses only on individual preferences or choices cannot capture common goods because what makes them good is endogenous to the living of the life in which those goods are simultaneously generated and enjoyed.

Seeing development ethics founded not only on the idea of the freedom of each individual to live a life she has reason to choose and value but also on the idea of the common good has different implications for our understanding of what governments should do to promote human flourishing. In the former perspective, political authority is limited to securing the right of individuals to choose and to enabling them to exercise their choice. For example, political authority should guarantee adequate provision of food so that people have the ‘capability to be well nourished should they choose so’ (to take Sen’s well-known fasting monk vs. starving child example). Nussbaum (2000) has strongly argued that the role of political authority is to give opportunities for each individual to exercise central human capabilities, should they choose so, but is not to require them to do so. Political authority is seen as enabling and coordinating collective action to secure public goods which are conducive to improving individual well-being. But collective action is not motivated by any other goal other than the

instrumental value of the public good for each individual's life. Individuals willingly pay taxes to finance an extensive road network and efficient refuse disposal service so that they can better live the life they choose to live. The community in which people live, such as the city or nation-state, is instrumentally useful for the generation of goods sought by separate individuals who consume goods together (bridges, sewage systems, the police). We have argued that, what international development crucially needs is not only another category of commodities such as global public goods, understood as securing or increasing the possibilities for individual choice, but also a conception of the good life in common.

Recognising the life in common of a city or nation as a species of good unavailable to anyone except by the irreducibly common action which makes it what it is raises further questions. Among these are: how is the common good generated or nurtured and how can we ensure that the common life of a community is good and not bad? Addressing these questions would require another paper. We emphasise here that there is no guarantee that participation in common action will generate something genuinely good. It might lead to bringing into power a government which might use nuclear weapons or which introduces unjust structures such as those of Apartheid.<sup>15</sup> Human actions are always fallible because they are human. However, that the 'possibility of moral evil is inherent in man's constitution'<sup>16</sup> does not nullify the claim that the good for each of us is found and sustained in relationships, whether at the level of the community of the family, village, country or the world, and that public policy ought to recognize and nurture them if it is not to undermine human well-being.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of unjust structures, see Deneulin *et al.* (2006c).

<sup>16</sup> 'What is meant by calling man fallible? Essentially this: that the *possibility* of moral evil is inherent in man's constitution' Ricoeur (1986: 133).

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